

ON "THE CHAMBERED NAUTILUS" BY OLIVER
WENDELL HOLMES: REDUX

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Through the kindness of Dr. Alan R. Kabat, I have been made aware of several studies, antedating mine (Johnson 1998), on Oliver Wendell Holmes's famous poem, *The Chambered Nautilus*. The most ambitious of these was *Historical and Contemporary Backgrounds of The Chambered Nautilus*, an essay of some 70 quarto pages, written by McColley (1947) while an employee of the Civilian Production Administration. Adkins (1937) had previously suggested several possible sources of inspiration, both poetic and scientific, which may have influenced Holmes.

The most fascinating of the articles located by Kabat was by Christy (1937), who discovered the poem, *The Nautilus and the Ammonite* by G.F. Richardson (reprinted, 1999), which appeared in May, 1851 in *The Family Visitor*, a journal published in Cleveland, Ohio. While this is a mere adumbration of the poem by Holmes, Christy argues that "bits of dross in Richardson's work appear to have been transmuted to more familiar golden felicity by Holmes." In addition, Christy continues, "there was the theme: transitions from mollusk to man, from 'oceans brim' to 'life's stormy sea,' and at the end the outlook 'to a distant strand' (to give but a few of his examples) -- the items severally insignificant, but unitedly acquiring some suggestion of significance."

Among the several founders of *The Family Visitor*, mainly containing articles advocating temperance, family values, and items of useful information, was Jared Potter

Kirtland (1793-1877). He was a physician and pioneer naturalist who published the first list of the land and freshwater shells of Ohio. His *Fishes of Ohio* appeared in *The Family Visitor*, and as a subscriber, Louis Agassiz wrote Kirtland, two months after Richardson's poem was published, inquiring "Do you collect insects?" Whether or not the letter was answered, Kirtland did describe a new butterfly, *Libythea backmanii* in the October 21, 1851 issue of the magazine (Albrecht, 1985). Christy hypothesized that Agassiz passed the poem to his good friend Holmes, whose own poem did not appear, until seven years later, in February of 1858.

While McColley, Adkins, and Christy all highlighted sources of poetic and scientific influences that may have influenced Holmes, his treatment of the material in *The Chambered Nautilus* was beyond peradventure unique as not to place him in the category of T.S. Eliot whose similarities to Madison Cawen's *Waste Land*, were hardly coincidental.

For the convenience of the reader, Holmes' poem, as originally typeset, is reprinted herein.

THE CHAMBERED NAUTILUS.

This is the ship of pearl, which, poets feign,
 Sails the unshadowed main, --
 The venturous bark that flings
 On the sweet summer wind its purpled wings
 In gulfs enchanted, where the siren sings,
 And coral reefs lie bare,
 Where the cold sea-maids rise to sun their
 streaming hair.
 Its webs of living gauze no more unfurl;

Wrecked is the ship of pearl!
And every chambered cell,
Where its dim dreaming life was wont to
 dwell,
As the frail tenant shaped his growing shell,
 Before thee lies revealed, --
Its irised ceiling rent, its sunless crypt un-
 sealed!

Year after year beheld the silent toil
 That spread his lustrous coil;
 Still, as the sprial grew,
He left the past year's dwelling for the new,
Stole with soft step its shining archway
 through,
 Built up its idle door,
Stretched in his last-found home, and knew
 the old no more.

Thanks for the heavenly message brought by
 thee,
 Child of the wandering sea,
 Cast from her lap, forlorn!
From thy dead lips a clearer note is born
Than ever Triton blew from wreathed horn!
 While on mine ear it rings,
Through the deep caves of thought I hear a
 voice that sings:--

Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
 As the swift seasons roll!
 Leave thy low-vaulted past!
Let each new temple, nobler than the last,

Shut thee from heaven with a dome more
 vast,
 Till thou at length art free,
 Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unrest-
 ing sea!

NOTE

The library of the Boston Society of Natural History was sold for \$250,000 in 1943 to the Allan Hancock Foundation, now at the University of Southern California at Los Angeles. Through the kindness of Jean E. Campon, Librarian, I am informed that the works of Griffith, Pidgeon and Roget, previously mentioned (Johnson, 1998), were available to Holmes.

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